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COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Strengthening the role of the regional commissions in statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The Statistical Commission has called for the regional commissions to be strengthened in order to contribute to the much needed development at national statistical offices in their regions.[1,2] All regions include some countries that have severe problems, but some regions are much more disadvantaged than others.

The present report describes the regional commissions in general terms, provides some details of their activities in statistics and suggests some ways in which they could be strengthened. Annexes I to V then describe the work of each regional commission in turn. Finally, annex VI gives some information on the regional commissions in tabular form.

Notes

[1] Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 8 (E/1995/28), para. 12 (f).

[2] Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 9 (E/1995/29), para. 57.

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I. ORIGINS

1. The regional commissions were created at different times over a period from two to about 20 years after the creation of the United Nations itself, essentially to provide closer links among United Nations Member States and between Member States and the United Nations Secretariat, and in some instances to aid the economic reconstruction of war-devastated areas. The United Nations Secretariat at its Headquarters in New York deals directly with all of the 185 United Nations Member States for many purposes, including data collection and technical assistance in statistics, but suitably equipped regional commissions also have a crucial role to play because of their particular advantages and the common interests of the member countries within each region. The executive secretaries of the five regional commissions report directly to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

II. PROXIMITY TO COUNTRIES

2. The nature of the relationships between the regional commissions and their member countries, and among member countries within regions, is still the main strength of the regional commissions. Geographical proximity and common languages enable regional commissions to be aware of the needs, views and problems of their members. This imposes a responsibility to monitor progress and disseminate comparative data on their member countries. Equally importantly, member countries with common or related interests find a forum in the regional commissions in which they are equal partners and that gives them a collective link to the whole United Nations system and to many other international agencies. The objectivity and neutrality that are hallmarks of the United Nations are equally pertinent in the regional commissions.

III. STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES OF THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS

3. The statistical functions of the regional commissions may be described under five headings: (a) development and implementation of methodologies; (b) technical assistance; (c) data collection; (d) data analysis and presentation; and (e) coordination of regional statistical development.

A. Development and implementation of methodologies

4. Member countries use the regional commissions as a forum in which they can share and develop their national statistical methods and standards. By their nature, many of the functions of national statistical offices are unique within their own country but are duplicated in almost every other member country. Therefore, national statistical offices can learn from their neighbours and share experience to their mutual advantage.

5. Similarly, national statistical offices need to adopt standards that suit their own needs but also enable them to compare their results with other countries. Many statistical standards are world-level standards, but there are

also regional and subregional variants that are shared by groups of countries. Again, the regional commissions provide a forum in which such regional and subregional standards can be developed and disseminated.

6. Some standards are essentially developed at a global level and adapted to regional or local needs. Others are derived from regional recommendations and can eventually coalesce into a global standard.

7. A current priority is the implementation of the System of National Accounts, 1993 (1993 SNA), which has now been accepted in principle by almost all the countries of the world but which many countries are finding very difficult to adopt in practice. There are, however, many other important topics, including social and demographic statistics, that are of current concern.

8. The development and implementation of statistical methods and standards are extremely variable among regions as well as within regions. Decisions and conclusions of the Statistical Commission have noted the enormous disparities that exist, and have emphasized the crucially important role that suitably strengthened regional commissions could play in these areas.

B. Technical assistance

9. It follows that implementation of the 1993 SNA is a priority area for technical assistance. Some technical assistance in statistics is provided by global agencies to countries throughout the world, but some is provided by regional agencies and by donor countries to their neighbours within the same region. When technical assistance is provided at the regional level, it is generally because the needs and circumstances of neighbouring countries are similar or because donors have an interest in helping their regional neighbours. A current example is the technical assistance being provided by many agencies and countries to countries in transition in Europe and the former USSR.

10. All the regional commissions are involved in technical assistance, but the Statistical Commission has noted that their involvement is insufficient to accomplish their goals despite their relative advantage in working with their own members, and it has therefore been argued that other agencies should try to involve the regional commissions more in their technical assistance projects.

C. Data collection

11. Much data collection, such as for the Commodity Trade Database and national accounts aggregates, is undertaken at the world level, essentially because it enables global comparisons and aggregations. At the regional level, many member countries are interested in more specific and more detailed data. In practice, the amount of data collection activity is very different from one region to another, reflecting the different interests and resources of the member countries in the regions concerned.

D. Data analysis and presentation

12. It is important to note that the regional commissions have their own statistical data requirements in order to undertake such functions as economic analysis or, for example, environmental assessment. Regional commissions therefore disseminate statistical data in many forms through publications and reports of their various statistical and non-statistical activities.

13. Again, the capacities of the regional commissions are insufficient to undertake the data collection and dissemination that is required of them.

E. Coordination of regional statistical development

14. The regional commissions are also an important focus of regional statistical development, through which not only member countries but also other international and regional institutions can come together to coordinate their statistical activities.

IV. RESOURCES

15. The regional commissions are relatively small and are unlikely ever to be large organizations. Indeed, with the continuing United Nations financial crisis and the pressure for restructuring, the regional commissions have less resources in the biennium 1996-1997 than in the previous period, and are intended to be reduced again in 1998-1999, although the reductions for the regional commissions are likely to be less than for other parts of the United Nations Secretariat. Being small yet having relatively close relations to their member countries, the regional commissions can expect to have relatively few independent activities but must depend on close collaboration with their member countries, with Headquarters and with other agencies.

16. The outputs and services of the regional commissions are therefore very much dependent upon the inputs of their member countries and of other agencies, both at the world level and at the regional and subregional levels. But no matter how much the regional commissions can rely on the collaboration of their members and other intergovernmental institutions, they must nevertheless have sufficient resources to enable them to play their crucially important and complementary role in conjunction with the United Nations Statistics Division in New York and other relevant bodies.

V. CONCLUSIONS

17. The present outline of the regional commissions and the more detailed descriptions of each regional commission contained in annexes I-V demonstrate that the regional commissions have in common their essential role in maintaining close relations between United Nations Member States and the United Nations Secretariat, together with other agencies. But there are many differences among the regional commissions and the circumstances in which they work, and it is

evident that they are provided with insufficient resources for the tasks that they are called upon to perform.

18. Some suggestions for ways in which the activities of all the regional commissions could be strengthened are set out below.

A. Member States

19. First, it is essential that the member countries of each of the regional commissions take an active role. The secretariats of the commissions themselves are all small and can therefore undertake relatively little substantive work on their own, but they can contribute to substantive work and provide a forum in which all member countries can work together in pursuit of shared goals. The commitment of statisticians in member countries must be at the level of the head of the national statistical offices, but effective cooperation must be at all levels. Experience in many regions has shown that national statisticians can profit very substantially by sharing experience with other countries, and by developing methods and definitions that suit their own purposes and those of their neighbours.

20. Member countries can also profit and contribute to the work of regional commissions by lending staff on a temporary basis to the statistical divisions of the regional commissions. This can be a very valuable learning experience for the staff concerned, and at the same time can provide the commissions with staff who have the right background and experience in a national statistical office. Since the regional commissions are so small, even one professional staff member can make a significant difference.

B. International organizations

21. Second, international organizations can work more with and through the regional commissions so that the regional commissions, with their close knowledge of the member countries in the region, can provide a liaison with international organizations that work at the global level. The regional commissions can also provide a forum in which countries in their regions and the international organizations can come together and coordinate their activities.

C. United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Population Fund

22. Third, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) are the main funding agencies of the United Nations, and can therefore provide extrabudgetary resources to the regional commissions by using the commissions as executing agencies for some of their projects. These are the main funding agencies, although others, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), may also provide some extrabudgetary funds. As well as increasing the total resource base available to the regional commissions, such funds can provide much needed flexibility, because although they are strictly earmarked for specific projects they may be more flexible by

allowing the possibility of shifting funds from one budget item to another within a project. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency in recent years for the funding agencies to move away from regional projects and to provide funds directly to specific countries. Although this may seem to have some advantages, that form of funding is more difficult to coordinate, is prone to duplication and reduces the effectiveness of the regional commissions. Such policies are decided not by the secretariats of the funding organizations but rather by their member countries. National statistical offices can therefore help persuade their foreign services that policies that would help to strengthen the regional commissions should be pursued.

D. United Nations regular budget

23. Fourth, United Nations regular budgets could be allocated more flexibly. Extrabudgetary funding is particularly important because the regular United Nations budget is very tightly constrained and only minuscule funds are allowed to be spent on equipment, consultancies and travel. In the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), for example, 98 per cent of the regular budget is allocated by the General Assembly to staff costs, leaving only about 2 per cent to spend on all other facilities. As a result, the statistical staff of the regional commissions are unable to attend important meetings even within their own region and even when there is no financial crisis. Indeed, frequent United Nations financial crises restrict such activities even further. The same or similar restrictions apply throughout the United Nations. Again, it is United Nations Member States through the General Assembly and its committees that decide on the allocation of financial resources in the regular budget, so that national statistical offices could use their influence on their Governments to persuade them to allow the United Nations Secretariat to operate a much more flexible and efficient allocation of funds between staff and other costs.

E. Priorities within the regional commissions

24. Fifth, member Governments could give higher priority to statistical work within the regional commissions so that more resources could be devoted to their statistical divisions, even during periods of restructuring and downsizing.

F. Statistical staff in the regional commissions

25. Finally, the statistical staff of the regional commissions themselves must actively encourage member countries and other international agencies to work with them, by showing that the regional commissions can play the role for which they were intended.

26. In the final analysis, however, the responsibility lies mainly with the statistical offices of the member countries themselves; it is they who will gain from strengthened regional commissions and it is their inputs that will make the regional commissions stronger.

Annex I

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

1. Statistics in Africa is one of the oldest programmes of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The need for the programme was identified at the inception of ECA in 1958, when at its first session it approved the implementation of a long-term development programme for the African region. It was then realized that the statistical infrastructures of ECA member countries were weak. That realization led to the establishment of the Conference of African Statisticians, which held its first session in 1959. Since then, the Conference met every other year until 1980, when it was combined with the Conferences of African Planners and the Conference of African Demographers and renamed the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians, Demographers and Information Scientists. In 1994, that name was changed to the Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Population and Information Specialists. The Conference, which is one of the specialized subsidiary bodies of the ECA Conference of Ministers, meets every two years. It helps to identify regional needs, and sets priorities for ECA work in statistics. At each session of the Conference, the ECA secretariat presents a draft work programme for the four subject areas for approval. For statistics, the programme covers economic, social, demographic and environment statistics. The report of the Conference is presented to the ECA Conference of Ministers.

2. ECA maintains close contacts with the national statistics offices in all its 53 member countries mainly through meetings, advisory services and dissemination, as well as the exchange of published materials, including aggregated and comparative data. Since 1990, African countries have been celebrating African Statistics Day on 18 November in order to increase public awareness of the importance of statistics. In 1995, ECA hosted the first joint Conference of the International Association for Official Statistics and the African Statistical Association.

3. Concerted African efforts to provide opportunities for the training of an adequate number of statistical staff for national statistical offices started in 1961. Emphasis was initially placed on middle-level training, with more gradual professional facilities. But in spite of those efforts and because of staff losses, the staff position in many African statistical offices remains unsatisfactory.

4. In 1987, ECA assisted in establishing the Statistical Development Programme for Africa (SDPA), with funding support from UNDP. The three components of SDPA were: the African Household Survey Capability Programme, the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) and the National Accounts Capability Programme. Since 1993, SDPA has suffered serious setbacks due to funding constraints.

5. Apart from the SDPA project, ECA statistical development activities include the Regional Advisory Service in Demographic Statistics (RASDS) and the Inter-Census Training Programme for sub-Saharan Africa. Since the end of 1992,

RASDS has operated within the framework of the new UNFPA arrangements entitled country support teams.

6. Apart from project activities, the regular ECA programme in statistics assists member countries in developing their statistical capacities through advisory missions, with emphasis on on-the-job training, seminars and training workshops. ECA has regional advisers in the following areas: organization and management of national statistical systems; economic statistics; demographic statistics; database management; sampling; cartography; and computerized mapping.

7. ECA maintains a regional statistical database that carries socio-economic and environment data collected directly from its member countries, other data compilers and published materials. However, the database is not comprehensive. Rehabilitation of African statistical systems has emerged as a priority issue because national capacities have seriously deteriorated since the 1980s, mainly due to the weak economic conditions of ECA member countries. As a result, in 1990, the sixth session of the Conference of African Planners, Statisticians, Demographers and Information Scientists formulated the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s. The Plan of Action is based on three cardinal principles: the central role of an improved statistical system in economic and social development; the key role of ECA in the development and promotion of statistics in Africa without prejudice to the role of other agencies and donors; and the need to coordinate the support provided by international agencies and donors.

8. In order to coordinate activities undertaken within the framework of the Plan of Action and monitor its implementation the Coordinating Committee on African Statistical Development was established in 1991. The membership consists of ECA member countries, regional statistical training centres participating in STPA, and African and non-African bilateral and multilateral agencies and donors.

9. The current ECA work programme in statistics is designed to assist its member countries in implementing the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s.

Annex II

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

1. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in 1997. ECE does not include the word "social" in its title - although its inclusion has occasionally been proposed - because its member countries have decided that they prefer that ECE concentrate on economic topics in general and deal less with social topics. Nevertheless, the Conference of European Statisticians deals with all the statistics that are of interest to the statistical offices of its member countries, including very substantial work in social and demographic statistics.

2. ECE is fortunate in including in its membership many of the more developed countries of the world, often with well-developed statistical systems and resources that enable them to undertake research. Since its inception therefore, the Conference has been able to maintain an active programme of work based on inputs from a relatively large proportion of its membership.

3. However, there have been two major changes in about the last five years that have affected the Conference profoundly. First, there was an increase in membership from 34 to 55 countries, including 26 countries that are usually described as countries in transition, many of which are newly independent States (some of those transition countries are members of both ECE and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)).

4. The second profound change, which began many years before, was the development and growth of both the European Community and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), most of whose members are in the ECE region.

5. The main effects of those changes have been twofold. First, the Conference has made technical cooperation with the countries in transition one of its major priorities. Second, the ECE Statistical Division works very closely with the Statistical Office of the European Community (Eurostat), OECD and others, and the Conference, at its annual plenary sessions, now considers the jointly presented programmes of work of the Conference, OECD, Eurostat and all international organizations that are active in statistics in the ECE region or other OECD countries. The joint presentation is not just a loose association but is an integrated whole that is guided by a small number of objectives and expected outputs that are defined by the member countries themselves for approximately 50 different fields of statistics.

6. The main strengths of the ECE Statistical Division and the Conference of European Statisticians, therefore, derive from the interest and activity of a substantial number of ECE member countries, especially in the ECE Bureau but also in the programme of expert activities, as well as from close collaboration with Eurostat, OECD and other agencies active in the ECE region.

7. ECE, in particular the Conference of European Statisticians, has therefore become the forum in which two major bodies with more limited numbers of members

(the European Community and OECD) have been able to work efficiently and most effectively with countries in the region that are not their members for the benefit of all the countries concerned. Other international agencies, such as the United Nations Statistics Division, the International Monetary Fund, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States, are also included in the joint work programme presentation (in so far as their work programmes have an impact in the ECE region), and the Conference is also therefore a forum in which they can work with all agencies active in the region.

8. At the same time, the Conference (which is a subsidiary body of both ECE itself and the United Nations Statistical Commission) has maintained its links with other countries in the world, particularly through the Statistical Commission. On the one hand, it is guided by standards set at the world level such as the 1993 SNA, and on the other hand some of its outputs, such as the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, have been transmitted to other regional commissions and have also been accepted by the Statistical Commission at the world level.

9. In addition to its influence on the regular programme of work of the Conference, the increase in the number of ECE member countries, which has greatly extended the number of countries in the region in need of technical assistance, has obliged ECE to appoint regional advisers, including on economic statistics, and to seek to provide other forms of technical assistance, such as through a UNDP-funded project in social and demographic statistics.

10. The current UNDP-funded project on social and demographic statistics is an example of how a regional commission can use its expertise and its relations with its member countries if it has the necessary financial resources. It has enabled the ECE Statistical Division, in close collaboration with other international institutions and donor and recipient countries, to contribute very substantially to the statistical capacities of member countries who very much need and benefit from the technical assistance provided.

11. As of October 1996, the ECE Statistical Division is also preparing to execute a UNDP-funded project devoted to statistical systems capacity-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

12. One of the most important functions of ECE, in which the cooperation of the statistical offices of member countries is also crucial, is the collection of data in order to monitor progress in the region, especially economic progress. The ECE Statistical Division is directly responsible for much of that work, and also coordinates the data collection undertaken by other ECE divisions. Although ECE collects a wide range of data directly from its member countries, it is careful not to duplicate the data collection of other agencies but rather to share data with them. ECE is almost continuously reviewing the ECE statistical publication programme, many of which are produced by other ECE divisions, but currently has some 30 titles that include statistics.

13. In addition to all the United Nations reviews of structure and finance, the ECE member countries, through their missions at Geneva, undertook in 1996 a very

detailed review of ECE activities intended to strengthen the effectiveness of ECE and to re-establish its priorities. An important result of the review is that statistical work has been reaffirmed as a high priority area that should have a greater share of the diminishing resources of ECE.

Annex III

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

1. The role of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in statistics must be placed within the role of the United Nations system and other international organizations in the international statistical system associated with socio-economic development.

2. With the aim of presenting ECLAC activities in the area of statistics, they have been ordered under two types of functions:

(a) Establishment and implementation of international classifications, methodologies and procedures;

(b) Production of regional and international comparable statistics for Latin American and Caribbean countries.

3. Both functions pertain to the field of regional and international cooperation in the area of statistics. Under the first function, ECLAC must organize countries' contributions to the establishment of international standards, including the preparation of summaries of regional points of view. At the level of implementation, it must promote the implementation of standards, working in close contact with countries and other international organizations. Under the second function of producing comparable statistics, a very high percentage of inputs are the production of the national statistical offices in the region. Again, the function implies a very close relation with countries; in addition, the relation of ECLAC with the rest of the United Nations statistical system and other international organizations is fundamental for moving towards common practices and international comparable figures.

4. Implicit in regional activities is the recognition of the heterogeneity of the international statistical system. Although that heterogeneity also exists within the ECLAC region, it is accepted that there is an important degree of relative homogeneity in the development of countries' statistical systems and that their priorities in the field of economic and social development are similar. In fact, since the creation of ECLAC in 1948 one of its three principal functions has been to help to develop information for economic and social development.

5. In the five decades that ECLAC has been working in statistics, its role has evolved. At first, national capacities were very feeble, especially in topics such as national accounts, but over the years, capacity-building has gradually improved, and new areas have appeared. Currently, social and environmental statistics have become priorities and capacity for gathering such statistics is being built. In the first stages of capacity-building, the international system and ECLAC have normally played a major role. With time, countries have acquired experience and the horizontal cooperation has become more important and with it the role of countries. Because of these considerations, the role of ECLAC is a dynamic one: some activities have lost importance while new ones have been created. In many areas, ECLAC has acted as the executing agency of projects

financed by institutions, such as UNDP, UNFPA, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

6. In a joint effort with the secretariat of the Organization of American States, ECLAC acts as Technical Secretary of the Meeting of Directors of Statistics of the Americas. Within that meeting, a programme of activities has been developed and the functions of regional and international cooperation in the statistical field have been distributed in the areas of national accounts; environmental statistics; dissemination of information; and social and demographic indicators. In other fields, such as the institutional aspects of national statistical offices, the informal sector and external trade, less structured activities have also been defined and the objective exists of incorporating them into the regional programme. Responsibilities have been distributed among countries and international organizations. The role of ECLAC as focal point is very important but the increasing participation of countries is fundamental. This is specially important because the scope of statistical activities has increased with time while the resources for regional and international cooperation have decreased.

7. The role of ECLAC as a producer and distributor of comparable statistics has always been a very important one in the region. It should be remembered that ECLAC is at the same time a producer and user of information. Such publications as the Preliminary Overview of the Latin American and Caribbean Economies, Economic Study and Social Panorama are among the most important periodic evaluations of the economic and social development of the region. The ECLAC data banks are among the most important and reliable sources of information utilized by the public and private sector of the region, and probably constitute the most frequent source of information of the Latin American media. Finally, ECLAC normally carries out joint ventures with national statistical or economic institutions to introduce studies in the field of economic and social development. At present, working together with countries, ECLAC has carried out comparative regional studies on the macroeconomic and institutional reforms and joint publications in the field of poverty and social conditions.

8. ECLAC is working together with some developed countries and international organizations to transfer technological and methodological progress to the region. The example of CESD-Madrid,[a] which channels European Community cooperation to the region, is significant. At the same time, through ACC an effort has been made to coordinate the cooperation of the international organizations. Their participation in the meetings of directors of statistics is considered specially important.

9. Finally, relations with the United Nations Statistics Division are constant and very important both in the establishment and implementation of standards and in the production of comparable international statistics. The cooperation in the case of the Commodity Trade Database is an important example of coordination and efficiency.

Notes

[a] The Madrid branch of the European Training Centre for Economic Statisticians of Developing Countries.

Annex IV

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

1. The regional commissions are multidisciplinary in character and draw their strength not only from their orientation towards the needs of the region that they serve but also their specialization in a number of subject areas. As a United Nations body, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) maintains very strong and regular contacts with member and associate member countries at both the policy-making and technical levels. For the field of statistics in the Asia and Pacific region, the Committee on Statistics - a subsidiary body of the ESCAP Commission - is the only intergovernmental organization covering this vast area. At the same time, the ESCAP secretariat maintains close contacts with the national statistical offices. These and other factors keep ESCAP abreast of the statistical needs of its members and associate members, and better equip it in formulating and implementing relevant and useful programmes. While proximity to the countries is a definite advantage in developing geographical specialization - something difficult to achieve by entities outside the region - the marked heterogeneity among the countries of the ESCAP region calls for special skills, localized knowledge, and competence for adopting, whenever required, a case-by-case approach.

2. ESCAP plays an important role in improving the national statistical capabilities of the countries of the Asia and Pacific region through a variety of means and by functioning as a conduit between the national and global statistical systems. It promotes the exchange of technical information and country experiences; significantly contributes to skills development; and facilitates the evolution of regional norms and standards, the incorporation of regional concerns into global standards, and the promotion of those international standards.

3. The ESCAP Committee on Statistics has a well established 45-year history as a regional conference. It began as the Regional Conference of Statisticians in 1951; changed its name to the Conference of Asian Statisticians in 1957; and was renamed the Committee on Statistics in 1974, when ESCAP changed its name from the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) to ESCAP to formally incorporate social aspects of development as well as the Pacific subregion. The important role that the Committee plays is also evident in the fact that during several transformations and restructuring exercises in ESCAP, Governments have decided to keep the Committee on Statistics as a subsidiary body of ESCAP.

4. The sessions of ESCAP and the Committee on Statistics provide opportunities to review and assess national statistical activities, identify common concerns and issues, develop regional approaches to address new challenges, and strengthen coordination with intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

5. Following observations by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-seventh session that the role of the regional statistical conferences and statistics divisions was vital, the Committee on Statistics paid particular attention to strengthening its role and functioning while reviewing and revising its terms of

reference in 1994. The Committee has also adopted a new approach whereby its elected officials would continue to serve as a Bureau until the next election of officials. Those arrangements entail increased recognition by the members and associate members of ESCAP of the ownership of the statistical activities of ESCAP, and ensure a continuity of leadership and guidance by the Bureau between Committee sessions. In agreeing to act as the focus of regional statistical development, the Committee has also started to develop stronger tools for coordinating various aspects of statistical activities in the region.

6. The Working Group of Statistical Experts, which usually meets in the years when the Committee session is not held, has also emerged as a useful and strong forum. Its ninth session in early 1996 was attended by 23 members and associate members, whose delegations invariably came from their capitals. Similarly, the Committee on Statistics usually attracts a strong attendance from the capitals, a feature that is not so prominent among other subsidiary bodies of ESCAP. The great interest in the statistical activities of ESCAP on the part of its members and associate members is also demonstrated in attendance at technical meetings. Since those meetings are almost always organized under extrabudgetary projects, the cost of participation for one country nominee is normally borne by ESCAP. However, many developing countries send multiple participants utilizing sources of funding available to their Governments. The ESCAP secretariat views this as a strong indication of the usefulness of its technical meetings.

7. The ESCAP secretariat promotes exchange of experience through meetings, advisory services, publications and dissemination of technical information, and helps to enhance national capacities through human resources development by organizing training courses and workshops, mainly through its training arm the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP). SIAP has its origins in actions taken by the Conference of Asian Statisticians in the 1960s, during an era of institution-building that also saw former ECAFE spawn the Asian Development Bank. The mix of technical cooperation modalities exert their impact synergistically. The technical meetings, regional training courses and workshops, and methodological publications help in the process of exchange of information on issues and topics of common concerns. Activities are also often organized on a subregional basis to attain a sharper focus. On the other hand, the ESCAP advisory services and country courses organized by SIAP provide the ability to concentrate on issues relevant to the country concerned. The strength of this approach lies in the sound linkages among various modalities and the ability of ESCAP to secure cooperation from international organizations and countries. For example, ESCAP was able to participate in the lengthy global process of the revision of the System of National Accounts and provide inputs on behalf of the Asia and Pacific region. It organized two subregional seminars to introduce the revised SNA, and is planning to organize several subregional workshops to assist developing countries in the implementation of the 1993 SNA. At the same time, advisory services are available to individual countries on the development and improvement of national accounts, while country courses can also be organized on the 1993 SNA on request by SIAP. It is this multi-pronged approach that makes it possible for ESCAP to pool scarce resources and achieve concrete results.

8. Another scenario could be illustrated by the developments following meetings on economic classifications used in population censuses; the meetings

were organized by ESCAP, with funding from UNFPA and in close cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Statistics Division, and by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand. Following the meetings, a number of countries required assistance in revising their classifications and utilizing computer-assisted coding. While advisory services were rendered by ESCAP, cooperation was sought from the ILO, the South Pacific Commission, Statistics New Zealand and the Australian Bureau of Statistics to provide technical assistance to the requesting countries. The initial meetings also provided impetus to developments, following which an expert group was established by the South Pacific Commission, with the close participation of ESCAP, for developing a variant of the International Standard Classification of Occupations for the Pacific island developing countries. This is just one of many examples of the important roles that the regional commissions play and the multiplier effects that are generated from their activities.

Annex V

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

1. In the context of reform of the United Nations in general and of the regional commissions in particular, the role of statistics divisions should be enhanced towards more efficient monitoring of progress in global and regional developments, as well as towards assisting the national statistical organizations of developing countries to become more responsive to national and international needs for timely and efficient statistics.

2. The regional commissions have the comparative advantage of being more closely linked to the member countries that they serve, and have a good and close knowledge and awareness of their specific needs, as well as of the problems they face. Thus, they are in a unique position to cooperate with their respective countries in adapting and implementing national and regional statistical programmes in response to recommendations and resolutions emanating from international conferences, summits and world communities. They can also serve as focal points for the dissemination of regional information on their respective regions. Their geographical proximity makes their activities in these areas cost-effective and more responsive to national and regional requirements.

3. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has the additional advantage that all of its member States use the same language, namely Arabic, which is considered the official language of ESCWA. Moreover, ESCWA is in the unique position of assuming an important role in the ongoing peace process in the region, a process requiring maintaining and developing the efficient and accurate data needed for monitoring and maintaining the success of the process.

4. Activities of ESCWA in the past, including the recent establishment of the ESCWA Statistics Committee, have had some impact on the development of statistics in the region. Yet the statistical departments in most of the ESCWA countries have not yet reached an acceptable level of development compared to those in more developed regions, and the rhythm of development of national statistics lags behind that in other governmental sectors. ESCWA should be able to fulfil a stronger role in the development of statistics in the region. However, in order to assume a more effective role, the mandate of its Statistics Division and the commensurate resources should be reinforced to include the following:

(a) Strengthening its capabilities as a United Nations body for carrying out international programmes and projects in the region;

(b) Strengthening its role as a coordinator of regional statistical activities, as an initiator of capacity building and institution-building activities, and as a forum for national and regional statisticians;

(c) Strengthening its role as a training centre for the development of human resources in statistics in the region;

(d) Strengthening its role as an executing agency of not only regional projects but national projects as well. In this regard, ESCWA is able to build on its experience and draw on experts within the region who have the cultural background to enable them to deal successfully and at a lower cost with national and regional situations. At present, ESCWA is excluded from many institution-building projects in the region, including those being executed in the country in which ESCWA headquarters is located;

(e) Reducing the marginalization of ESCWA within the international statistics system by allowing it to have the necessary resources needed to actively participate in international statistical programmes, activities, task forces and working groups. It should no longer be acceptable that financed international programmes and projects do not take into account the financing of their regional components;

(f) Giving ESCWA the mandate of translating technical statistical documents into Arabic. Those documents have so far been translated in New York by translators who have no knowledge of the subject matter. The translation is more often than not meaningless or misleading and wrong technically. At ESCWA, they will be translated by statisticians who understand the intended meaning of the technical terms and who know the equivalent Arabic terminology. The translation will also be revised by the staff of the Statistics Division to ensure that the translation serves the purpose for which it is intended. Indeed, at its first session, held in Amman in November 1995, the ESCWA Statistics Committee recommended that ESCWA, in cooperation with the League of Arab States and the Arab organizations concerned, work towards the unification of terminologies used in the area of statistics.

Annex VI

GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS

	ECA	ECE	ECLAC	ESCAP	ESCWA
Date created	1958	1947	1948	1947	1974
Member countries	53	55[a]	48	60[b]	13
Location	Addis Ababa	Geneva	Santiago	Bangkok	Amman
Frequency of meetings of intergovernmental statistical committee	biennial	annual	biennial	biennial	biennial
Statistical Division staff	30	43[c]	34[d]	31	17
Total commission staff	773	240[e]	580	720	264

[a] Of the 55 ECE member countries, 8 former USSR countries also belong to ESCAP.

[b] Of the 60 ESCAP members and associate members, 8 also belong to ECE and another 4 are non-regional members.

[c] The 43 ECE Statistical Division staff include 9 who are not involved in statistical work.

[d] Of the 34 ECLAC Statistical Division staff, 7 are not involved in statistical work.

[e] The ECE total staff is relatively few because many functions (personnel, finance etc.) are undertaken on its behalf by the United Nations Office at Geneva.